OVERVIEW
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Management Board of Cabinet

OPS Management Series

Decentralization of Decision-Making

Applying the Principle of Delegation

Introduction

The Ontario Government has adopted the concept of decentralizing administrative decision-making as a means of providing services to the public in an effective and efficient manner. This concept is identified in Ontario's Management Philosophy as one of three basic characteristics of the management process.

Decentralization takes the form of geographical dispersion of facilities and personnel in the various regions of the province, accompanied by the transfer of decision-making responsibility to regional and local offices. This transfer of responsibility is effected through application of the management principle of delegation.

Delegation is essential to effective decentralization of services, for it places decision-making responsibility in the hands of those government managers who are in the best position to match service capabilities to client needs. Without delegation, the delivery of services would become hopelessly encumbered. Authority would be concentrated at the top of the management hierarchy, and managers at every level would have to obtain specific prior approval for all their decisions and actions. This situation would inevitably result in long delays in providing services, and it would jeopardize the quality of services provided by imposing too great a distance between decision-makers and the public to be served. Decentralization through delegation avoids these problems while maintaining the necessary control over management of public resources.

This publication explains the concept of decentralized decision-making by focusing on the principle of delegation and its application in the Ontario Public Service. Delegation is defined and related to the other two characteristics of the management process (achieving results and accountability, discussed in separate publications in this series); its place in the cycle of management functions also is described. Other sections of the document discuss how managers can use delegation in managing government programs and outline the conditions required for effective delegation.

What Is Delegation?

Delegation, briefly defined, is the assignment of responsibilities and authority by a manager to one or more subordinates. It carries with it the condition that subordinates shall be held accountable for their performance of the delegated tasks.

A manager may delegate only such responsibilities and authority as have been assigned to him by his superiors. In principle, he may delegate any of the responsibilities entrusted to him, subject to legislative or policy restrictions; in practice, however, the opportunity to delegate will be conditioned by a variety of other factors, including the manager's own management style and the capabilities of his staff.

Delegation may be simple, as in the case of assigning specific tasks to non-managerial personnel, or it may be complex, as in the case of transferring responsibilities to subordinate managers. In the management system of the Ontario Public Service, delegation at the managerial level necessarily involves the transfer of all management functions associated with a given responsibility. The person to whom the responsibility is delegated is authorized and expected to carry out the full range of functions included in the management cycle: evaluating and setting direction; planning and allocating resources; organizing and staffing; motivating and directing; and monitoring and maintaining direction. Any withholding of authority to perform the complete sequence of steps in the cycle impairs the effectiveness of delegation and inhibits the management role of the person to whom the responsibility is delegated. The concept of delegation described here, as applied between public service managers, assumes full transfer of management functions along with the assigned responsibility. Delegation to non-managerial staff does not normally carry with it these management functions.

Delegation in the Management Process

In the management process, delegation is equated to the concept of decentralized decision-making. This component of the process is interrelated with the concepts of results achievement and accountability.

The Managing By Results (MBR) approach adopted for Ontario Government managers is aimed at the twin goals of achieving results and doing so through the efficient use of available resources. Delegation supports these two goals by spreading the focus on results to managers at all levels of the organization and by contributing to the efficiency of program administration.

Accountability is a key factor in effective delegation. In the public service environment, it is essential that control be maintained over the management of public resources. This is achieved by holding public servants accountable for their decisions and actions in the work place. When duties are delegated, accountability for results accompanies the transfer of responsibility and authority: the person to whom the duties are delegated will be held to account for his performance of those duties. At the same time, the manager who has delegated the duties will be held accountable by his superiors for his subordinate's performance. In this way, delegation reinforces accountability by transmitting it to all levels of the management hierarchy and thereby linking all participants in the management process.

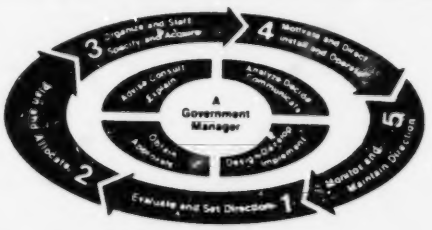
Delegation in the Management Cycle

As explained above, delegation at the managerial level involves the transfer of all functions included in the management cycle. The opportunity to delegate, to both subordinate managers and non-managerial staff, arises at two points in the cycle, namely, in steps 2 and 3.

In Step 2, the manager focuses on planning how the program will be carried out and how resources will be allocated to the various tasks to be performed.

The aim is to employ the resources available, including staff resources, as efficiently as possible towards the achievement of program goals. The opportunities which exist for delegating tasks to other staff in the organization should therefore be considered.

The decision to delegate is implemented in Step 3, when the manager organizes and staffs the program. In effecting the delegation, the manager will be required to carry out a series of functions that together will establish the framework for performance of the assigned tasks. These functions are described in the last section of this publication, "Necessary Conditions for Effective Delegation."



Management Cycle

The Use of Delegation as a Management Tool

Delegation is practised most frequently as a means of effectively distributing workload among the individuals in an organization. In the Ontario Government, as has been stated earlier, delegation also serves to increase the efficiency of program management and the effectiveness of service delivery.

Efficiency is achieved in a number of ways, among them the following:

- Through delegation, the various skills and talents of many individuals can be drawn into the work effort. Most people have abilities that are not fully used in the normal requirements of their jobs. Delegation provides the opportunity to develop such abilities and direct them towards the achievement of program goals.

- Staff usually derive satisfaction from being involved in an important way in the work being done. Delegation allows managers to include subordinates in decision-making and planning and to demonstrate the significance of their contribution to the success of the undertaking. Increased job satisfaction generally results in improved performance of assigned tasks.

- Delegation at the managerial level transfers the focus on efficient resource use to others in the organization and thus increases the likelihood that this goal will be achieved.

- Managers often find that delegation of responsibilities and tasks frees them to devote time to other functions, such as long-range planning and staff development, which will improve the efficiency of their operations.

The manager's aim should be to delegate those responsibilities that can be carried out effectively by others in his organization. He should not apply the concept indiscriminately.

As well, in the public service setting, the manager's use of delegation should be directed to improving the quality of service provided to the public. Such improvement can be achieved through the transfer of decision-making authority and responsibility to the organizational level where services are most closely matched to needs. Delegation also can improve the quality of service provided by motivating staff to direct their efforts to this end. It is generally acknowledged that public service staff (management and non-management alike) deal more effectively and efficiently with the public when they perceive their work to be useful and satisfying.

Necessary Conditions for Effective Delegation

Several conditions must prevail in the work setting if delegation is to be effective. The most important of these are summarized below.

Staff Capabilities

Staff must be capable of accepting delegated responsibilities and meeting performance requirements. Capability includes not only work qualifications and potential for developing additional skills, but also the attitude of the individual. Delegation will likely be effective where staff

- possess self-confidence,
- welcome increased responsibility,
- are able to work without close supervision, and
- can accept constructive criticism.

Conversely, delegation is seldom successful when subordinates demonstrate the opposite tendencies.

To some extent, the manager's ability to delegate is limited by the personal attributes and skills of his staff, but the effective manager will look for ways of developing personnel so as to minimize their shortcomings and bring out their strengths. Delegation, combined with appropriate staff training and development, can substantially improve the quality of staff resources.

The Manager's Style and Attitude

The manager must be capable of delegating work. This means that he must be willing to give up direct, personal involvement in certain tasks or responsibilities; he must recognize that others can make a valuable contribution to the work of the organization; and he must possess the skill to match delegated tasks to the abilities of the staff who will carry them out.

When work is delegated to a subordinate manager, it is particularly important that the manager assigning the responsibility should transfer all of the management functions associated with it. He should avoid any subsequent interference in the performance of those functions, and he should never retain any of them within his own functional domain.

The manager who delegates also must remember that delegation does not eliminate his own accountability for performance of the assigned work. As the person to whom the responsibility and authority were originally assigned, he remains answerable for the results that are achieved. This sharing of accountability pervades all levels in the chain of delegation.

The Operating Framework

For delegation to be effective, a clear operating framework must be established to which both the manager and the subordinate can refer while the work is being carried out. The manager plays a predominant role in defining this framework, but he must involve the subordinate in the process to ensure that it is appropriate, acceptable and understood.

- First, the nature of the responsibilities must be clearly explained to those assuming it. They must be informed of their authority, specific duties and their accountability. The results to be achieved must be defined, accepted and understood by both the manager and the subordinate. Along with the definition of results, performance indicators must be established by which these results will be measured.

- Second, operating guidelines and procedures must be developed and discussed with the subordinate. Any uncertainties should be raised and resolved.

- Third, reporting relationships and procedures must be defined. The subordinate must clearly understand to whom he is accountable and how his accountability is to be demonstrated.

- Fourth, mechanisms for monitoring and control must be established and again discussed with the subordinate.

- Fifth, in support of the operating framework, appropriate channels of communication must be put in place to effect the sharing of information between the manager and his subordinate and to satisfy the reporting requirements of their relationship.

Where all these conditions are met, delegation is most likely to succeed.

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